

The First Presbyterian Church
Bridgeton, Cumberland County, New Jersey

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of New Jersey

Historic American Buildings Survey
Seymour Williams, A.I.A., District Officer
133 Central Avenue, Rahway, New Jersey

The First Presbyterian Church
Bridgeton, Cumberland County, New Jersey

Owner: The Trustees of the First Presbyterian Church

Date of Erection: Cornerstone laid 1792, building
completed 1795

Architect:

Builder:

Present Condition: Good

Number of Stories: One with balcony

Materials of Construction: Foundation - fieldstone

Exterior walls - brick

Interior walls - wainscot-
ing and plaster

Roof - pitch with wood
shingles

Historical Data:

When this church was erected "Bridge Town" consisted of about fifty dwellings with about three hundred inhabitants, a court house, and a jail. This was, however, the first church in the town. Services were sometimes held in the court house, but most of the time the people drove to Fairfield or to Greenwich. As a matter of fact, the people of Greenwich and Bridgeton in 1754 had jointly purchased a "parsonage farm" near Bowentown where at least two pastors who served the community resided.

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The question of having a church in this settlement was discussed as early as 1770. That year Alexander Moore in his will bequeathed a tract of land on the north side of Commerce Street "for the sole use of a Presbyterian Meeting House" together with a legacy of fifty pounds towards the building of a church.

In 1774 efforts were made to raise funds but the Revolutionary War put an end to this. In 1788 and 1789 several public meetings were held for the same purpose and much interest was shown.

Through the efforts of Dr. Jonathan Elmer, at that time United States Senator, Colonel David Potter, and General James Giles, Mark Miller, a Quaker, agreed to give the lot upon which the present building stands "To be used, occupied, and enjoyed by the inhabitants of Bridge Town, for the purpose of a burying ground for all said inhabitants generally, and for the erection thereon a house for the public worship of Almighty God". This lot comprised about two acres and is the northeast portion of the present burying ground. A general meeting of the inhabitants of the town was called in May, 1791 by Jonathan Elmer and David Potter. At this meeting Jonathan and his brother Eli Elmer were chosen "to take deed for same in trust as before stated". Later on David Potter and James Giles were added to the trustees. This tract has been increased through conveyances until at present about ten acres of ground are included.

At this meeting subscriptions were opened for raising a fund to build the church. About six hundred pounds were donated and work was begun in the spring of 1792. The foundation stone was laid on July 26 of that year. By September the walls were up and the roof was raised, but the money was exhausted and a way had to be found to raise money to complete the building.

At this time General Ebenezer Elmer was a member of the Assembly. It is believed that through his influence they passed an act "to authorize the subscribers to build a Presbyterian Church in Bridge Town in the County of Cumberland". The sale of tickets was slow and the lottery was widely distributed. In a letter to his brother-in-law, James Ewing of Trenton, dated October 17, 1793, Colonel Potter says, "I now take the liberty of enclosing fifty-six tickets from numbers 241 to 296 including both, which I hope you may be able to dispose of. Dr. Ebenezer Elmer has fifty also, which I hope he can sell to the good men that passed the law for us. I fear we shall not be able to draw quite as soon as mentioned in the scheme, but the greater part are disposed of, and the managers told me yesterday that they only waited to hear from South Carolina of the success of those that were sent to Mr. Hollinshead, Ramsey and others which they may no doubt dispose of".

About two thousand dollars was raised and work was resumed on May 17, 1795. The church was dedicated by Reverend John Davenport of Deerfield. On Sunday, December 13, 1795, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper was administered for the first time by the Reverend William Clarkson. In May of that year, a committee was appointed to rate the pews. Numbers 2 to 11 were rated at ten dollars and so on down to five dollars each towards the back of the church. The pews were then sold at public auction and the money was used to furnish the church. The plastering of the church was not done until 1798.

The first pastor of the church was Dr. William Clarkson, a physician who had practiced in New York City. He had been ordained in the Greenwich church in 1794, and for several years he served the Bridgeton and Greenwich churches. For this service he received a joint salary of 175 pounds. In the spring of 1801 he removed to Savannah, Georgia.

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In 1805 Reverend Jonathan Freeman was the pastor serving Greenwich at the same time. The next pastor was the Reverend B. Holf installed in 1825; he continued to serve the church until 1834 when he was succeeded by the Reverend John Hennedy. Hennedy was followed by the Reverend Samuel B. Jones.

The church is still open to visitors, but regular services have not been held since the newer and larger Second and Third Presbyterian Churches have been erected. An annual meeting is held on Thanksgiving Day and for special events and on anniversary days services are also held in the old church.

The church is a fine example of colonial architecture and remains practically unchanged since its erection. The bricks were burned from native materials in a local kiln. Colonial doorways give entrance on three sides of the building; while a high pulpit with a Palladian window over it, occupies the fourth wall. The aisles are brick paved with the pew floors slightly raised and of wide hewn boards. The pews, however, are high straight backed with closed doors on the isle. The square family pews are found in the front of the ground floor and in the gallery, the view of the speaker being better in these places. The gallery runs across the rear and down both sides of the building. The walls are wainscoted with beaded boards painted white. Oil burning lights furnish the only illumination and heat is supplied by two ancient stoves which bear the name of "Jacob Downing, Atsion Furnace". The pipes from these stoves arch across the church to meet in the middle and then slant over the gallery and disappear in the chimney.

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District Officer

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ADDENDUM TO
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
West Broad Street
Bridgeton
Cumberland County
New Jersey

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